

GRANT FOR ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOLAR FARMS

WUR's research on the effects of solar farms on the soil and the ecology has attracted a substantial grant.

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) has allocated 3.6 million euros to the project SolarEcoPlus.

WUR will collaborate on this project with the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research TNO, and the solar farm developer LC Energy. Among the solar farms to be studied is Nergena, the one planned on WUR land at the Dijkgraaf. LC Energy aims to create a 10-hectare solar farm there, in combination with research.

Solar parks are controversial. Their opponents point to their possible negative impact on the soil and vegetation. Because the panels shade the ground, it could dry out and

vegetation could shrivel and die. 'But that is not research-based,' says WUR project leader Friso van der Zee. 'This grant enables us to research that. On the basis of the results, we expect to draw up design and management guidelines for improving the ecological quality of solar farms.'

To this end, solar farms created according to different designs will be studied. Along with conventional designs, the project will also look at 'bifacial' solar panels, which stand upright and capture sunlight on both sides. These panels are expected to score better on ecology, because they stand further apart.

CAMERA TRAPS

SolarEcoPlus consists of six solar farms on sandy, clay and marshy soils. One of these is the Nergena

solar farm – if the plan goes ahead, that is. Ede Municipal Council still has to give the official go-ahead, and there are doubts about whether that will happen. At an earlier stage, the plan was approved by a narrow majority of the municipality, and one member was absent. The decision is due soon. The ecological research focuses on a broad spectrum of biodiversity. Van der Zee explains that WUR has developed a monitoring protocol for the research. 'One aspect of it is monitoring mammals using



▲ Protest in Ede to stop the Nergena solar park.

PHOTO: ERIK WESSELIUS

camera traps. Another is monitoring changes in the soil quality, and we shall look at the effects on the chemical composition and fertility of the soil.' The project will be implemented over four years. WUR's research will be funded to the tune of 1.2 million euros. **BRK**